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ABSTRACT

This study examines how parents and teachers in a Central Los Angeles Mexican/Central American immigrant community talk about "successful development" for children. In order to examine how parents and teachers talk about children's academic and social development, the report draws from multiple data sources, such as field notes based on participant observation in homes, classrooms, and community programs; transcriptions of four focus groups with parents; and notes on informal and semi-informal interviews with parents and teachers. The report suggests implications for teachers and researchers working in immigrant populations, such as: teachers will benefit from more specific understanding of families' daily lives; sociocultural studies of literacy can help teachers; and teachers should explore how they can build in their literacy classrooms on the concrete practices in which families engage. (Contains 26 references.) (PM)

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Parents and Teachers Talk About Literacy and Success

CIERA REPORT #3-020

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CIERA Inquiry 3: Policy and Profession
How do parents and teachers in a Mexican/Central American immigrant community talk about "successful development" for children?

In this report, we examine emic views of "success" in a central Los Angeles community that is home to recent immigrants from Mexico and Central America. We draw from multiple data sources (fieldnotes based on participant observations in homes, classrooms, and community programs; transcriptions of four focus groups with parents; and notes on informal and semi-formal interviews with parents and teachers) in order to examine how parents and teachers talk about children's academic and social development. We draw implications for teachers and researchers working in immigrant communities.

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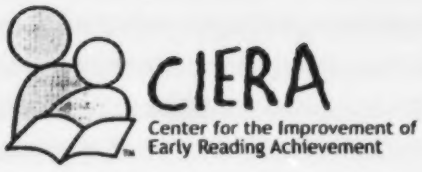

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Parents and Teachers Talk About Literacy and Success

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Literacy researchers recognize the importance of looking at the relationship between home and school literacy practices. Yet relatively few studies have actually done this. Most sociocultural analyses of language and literacy focus on one of two settings: classrooms (e.g. Au, 1980; Edelsky, 1986; Lee, 1995; Michaels, 1981) or homes (e.g. Solsken, 1993; Taylor & Dorsey- Gaines, 1988). Only a few consider the relationship between these two spheres in a sustained way (cf. Cherland, 1994; Delgado-Gaitan, 1990; Purcell-Gates, 1995). Even fewer place either setting in a larger community context (cf. Gallimore, Reese, Balzano, Benson, & Goldenberg, 1991; Heath, 1983).

Goldenberg, Gallimore, Reese and associates (Goldenberg, Reese, & Gallimore, 1992; Goldenberg & Gallimore, 1991; Reese, Gallimore, Goldenberg & Balzano, 1995) have gathered a large corpus of longitudinal data from a set of Latino immigrants and their mostly U.S.-born children. The breadth and depth of these data allow Goldenberg et al. to explore a complex set of interrelated issues like families' beliefs about literacy, school, and success, and the relationship between home and school practices. Through their work, they have helped to counter stereotypes about Latino immigrants, and to illuminate more precisely the ecocultural sources of variations in practices.

More work is needed, however, in order to gain an in-depth understanding of how beliefs about literacy and schooling are shaped within and across different social contexts, in relation to the resources that are available to people at any given point in time. We also need to probe the practices and beliefs of people or groups that are differently positioned within each context (e.g., parents, teachers, paraprofessionals, and students). Without this insight, research on "cultural differences" runs the danger of contributing to cultural or other group stereotypes.

Taking seriously the notion of context, we argue that there are two dimensions that are too easily overlooked in research. One is spatial: a given classroom cannot be understood without considering the school and community in which exists; and home literacy practices must be considered in relation to the daily lives of children and families. Daily lives in turn are shaped by parents' employment, the availability of childcare or after-school programs, and other environmental resources and constraints.

The second dimension, which intersects the first in multiple ways, is temporal. The settings that we study are not frozen in time. Activities take place in contexts that are marked by change: the implementation of new social policies; changing economic and political conditions both locally and globally; the development and distribution of new technologies, practices, and information; and the personal histories that individuals bring with them when they interact in any given setting. These changes in turn shape beliefs and practices in continuously evolving ways.

This larger perspective on the shaping of beliefs and practices in relation to literacy (and other social practices) is particularly important in times of rapid social change, such as we are experiencing in California at the end of the twentieth century. Changing demographics in our cities and schools reveal forces that directly bear on our interest in literacy and school success:

- Through the immigration process, families experience dramatic changes in the organization of their daily lives and visions for the future. This process may be marked by a series of changes, when families engage in "stage migration" (see Hondagneu-Sotelo, 1994, and Massey et al., 1987, for discussions of patterns of Mexican immigration to the U.S.) or when households reorganize themselves in response to changing immigration policies and patterns (cf. Chavez, 1992; Gabaccia, 1992; Hondagneu-Sotelo, 1994; Massey et al., 1987; Schiller, Basch, & Blanc-Szanton, 1992). This movement of people across borders is accompanied by the movement of resources, artifacts, practices, and ideas.

- Politics and policies shape the daily lives of families and schools. A few examples: Welfare reform forced many parents into work, and their children into childcare, diminishing the time that parents and children have together; immigration reform forced some families to separate across national borders, and others to change their plans for the spatial location of their futures; and bilingual education reforms (as under Proposition 227 in California) dramatically altered the linguistic landscape of classrooms and schools.

- Although the teaching force is perhaps slower to evolve, the 1990s has brought a certain degree of change even here, with more Latinos/as taking positions as teachers in inner-city communities. The majority of teachers are still of middle-class origin, and/or currently live solidly middle-class lives, but a certain sector are first-generation college students from immigrant families who have experienced at least some of what their immigrant students experience today.

Literacy acquisition does not take place simply in the heads of individuals. What children learn about the meanings and uses of print and print-related practices is shaped by their daily life experiences and the interactions that they have with people and print in the world around them. These experiences and interactions are in turn shaped by the forces we outlined above, among others. Sociocultural studies of literacy would benefit from a broader understanding of the social and cultural context in which practices take place. In our work we are attempting to do this by situating our analyses of parents' and teachers' voices within an understanding of the community in which they live and work, as well as their histories and experiences.

Methods

Our inquiry into parents' and teachers' views of literacy and success is one aspect of two larger studies. The first of these is centered at an elementary school and a preschool/community program in central Los Angeles. The majority of parents work in the downtown garment industry. Some families live within a few blocks of the school, while others commute long distances. Virtually all of the children qualify for free lunches under state guidelines.

For this project the second and third authors and several research assistants have been participant observers in classrooms at the elementary school, which we call "Franklin." (This is a pseudonym, as are all names in this article.) They also conducted focus groups with groups of teachers and of teaching assistants; more focus groups are planned for this year. These groups explored teachers' understandings of the daily lives of their students and families, their views of success for their students, and of potential obstacles to children's success. Informal interviews with teachers and paraprofessionals also occurred during the ongoing observations in classrooms and in the on-site after-school program.

We also draw from observations and focus groups conducted at the nearby preschool associated with Franklin's after-school program. The first author conducted a focus group with the teachers at this school, and five focus groups with parents from the preschool. (All parents of the 40 4-year-olds in the program were invited; 27 participated in all. The majority of these children have now gone on to kindergarten at Franklin.) The parent focus groups explored children's daily life experiences, home language and literacy practices, parents' hopes for their children's futures, and their visions for children's success. We were careful to avoid the term "success," however, instead asking open-ended questions like "How do you know when a child is doing well?" This method allowed us to tap into "parent-ese"—parents' ways of talking about their children.

The second project from which we draw is a comparative case study of childhoods and children's pathways of development in three California communities that vary in racial, ethnic, and class composition, as well as in histories of immigration and language use. For the present paper we focus on one of these communities: the intake area to a year-round public school not far from Franklin, which we call "Madison." The majority of the children at Madison, as at Franklin and the preschool, were born in the U.S. to parents who fled political and economic problems in their home countries in the 1980s and 1990s. Others are themselves immigrants who recently arrived with family members or rejoined those who came before them. We draw from multiple data sources in this ethnographic project, including over 1000 pages of field notes written during three years of participant observation, transcriptions of four focus groups with parents (a total of 19 parents participated), and notes on informal and semi-formal interviews with children, parents, teachers, the staff of community programs, and other community workers.

For our analyses of parents' views of literacy and success, we coded the focus group transcripts for talk about daily life; language and literacy practices, including parents' memories of learning to read in school; views of "success" and obstacles to success. We coded the teachers' group for talk

about families' daily lives; language and literacy practices; views of "success" and obstacles. We were attentive to talk about literacy and success throughout our fieldwork, which is still ongoing at Franklin, and recorded instances of it in our fieldnotes, because these provide the best means of tapping into "emic" views. We also shared our findings with a teacher at Franklin who is a key informant for the study; she offered feedback, correction, and elaboration.

Findings

In this paper, we contemplate parents' and teachers' talk in relation to our observations of ongoing social practices as these have unfolded over time. We selected three key areas to discuss from the myriad of issues that arose while talking to parents and teachers: daily lives and literacy practices, views of success, and views of obstacles to children's success. We consider each in turn below.

Daily lives and literacy practices

The first thing that became clear to us when we talked with parents was that there is no generic "Latino parent" to represent "this community." Parents come from a range of backgrounds and experiences. Some had attended universities in their countries of origin (Mexico, Guatemala and El Salvador); others had attended only the primary grades. Some had lived in the city; others in the countryside. Some were from middle-class backgrounds, others had been among the working poor, and still others were from very impoverished areas. A few were from indigenous communities and spoke Spanish as a second language. Most, however, worked in the same low-paying garment industry jobs in Los Angeles.

The second thing that became clear was that there was wide variation in families' current living arrangements. Some lived with extended family (aunts, grandparents, cousins). Some lived in nuclear families. Several families comprised single or widowed mothers and their children. Some rented small houses, but most lived in very small—often one-room—apartments.

Given this variation, it is difficult to give a general description of daily life for families in this community. But a common theme—and one of the most salient aspects of parents' talk about their lives—was the way in which time with their children (including for literacy-related activities) had to be shaped around the constraints of parents' work lives, including their domestic responsibilities. Those parents who worked in the garment industry (the majority of our sample) typically worked 5 1/2 days a week, for at least 8 to 10 hours a day. Often all adults in a household worked full-time. Evenings and weekends were devoted to cooking, housework, and physical care of children. It was against this background that parents talked about literacy practices. Whatever time they could dedicate to their children had to be constructed around their existing responsibilities.

For example, Marina Sandoval, a single mother of two children, told of getting home with her children around 6:00 each evening, feeding them (they are always hungry when they get home, so she serves them food that she cooked the night before), eating with them (with meals as a time for them to talk about their days), washing dishes, and preparing food for the next day. She explained that she lets her children watch television for 45 minutes while she does this. She seemed to feel that she had to justify her decision to let the children watch television. Numerous other parents also juxtaposed their talk about literacy to the lure that television held for their children. In our home observations, we have found that several families have purchased close-captioned televisions as a way of encouraging their children to read within the context of the children's preferred activity.

Alicia Rivera talked about a different sort of tension that delimited her own engagement with literacy: the tension between her own schoolwork (for ESL classes) and her housework. Setting children up with their own literacy activities—and putting her own aside—allowed her time to cook and clean. As she explained:

> pongo mis cuardernos por un lado y los pongo allí que jueguen o pinten, y yo me pongo a lavar trastes, a cocinar y todo eso porque como ya mi esposo llega ya, y tengo que tenerle todo listo.
>
> I put my notebooks aside and I set them [the children] there to play or draw, and I set myself to washing dishes, to cooking, and all that, because my husband will be home soon, and I have to have everything ready.

Estela Arriaza found similar ways to combine her domestic responsibilities with the kinds of affordances that might be seen as promoting kids' literacy development. She explained that she sets her 4-year-old son up with some writing or drawing, which she refers to literally as "homework" ("lo pongo con su tarea"). Then she cooks dinner while he draws or writes, and she talks to him about his work. (In general, families gave great importance to "la tarea," and this talk primed the preschool-aged children for the homework they would receive in elementary school. When children enter the public school system, "la tarea" also became the main artifact that crossed between home and school. Parents made assumptions about what children learned in school based on the evidence of homework, and teachers made assumptions about what went on in children's homes on the same basis.)

On the weekends, families' lives were structured around doing the laundry (usually in public laundromats), shopping, and housecleaning. But after these tasks were accomplished (with children's active participation), most families spent the rest of their time together, outside of their small apartments, exploring the larger city. They went to parks, the beach, local markets, distant swap meets, and suburban shopping malls. McDonalds was a favorite place for kids, and it was as much a place to play as a place to eat, in a city in which many parents viewed the parks as dangerous. While doing these things together, families traveled (by foot, bus, metro, or car) through a vibrant urban setting—a city that is alive with sights, sounds, smells, a wide array of activity, and a rich display of urban print. Parents talked about the interest that their preschool children took in this print. Since much of it was in English, this source of literacy input had to be filtered through parents' interpretations of its meaning.

When parents talked with us about their daily routines they did not pretend that their lives were easy. But they also did not emphasize their own hardships. Their attention focused on their children, and especially on their children's futures, in comparison with their own pasts in their countries of origin. This corroborates Reese et al.'s (1995) finding that Latino parents do not necessarily operate, as previous literature had suggested, with a "present time orientation."

Teachers' talk about children's daily lives

When teachers at Franklin talked about their students' lives outside of school, their talk centered almost exclusively on the hardships families faced. They did so from a largely sympathetic stance, and most had positive things to say about parents—that they really care, they believe in education, they know that reading is important, and that many parents support the school's work. But their talk about these parental strengths was usually interlaced with comments about the difficulties that families face. They spoke as if they had to convince others: "It [poverty] doesn't mean parents don't care or that they're lazy." This teacher went on: "It influences the home environment, though. How well a child sleeps is influenced by crowding, noise, etc. Children fall asleep in class. Nutrition is also affected by poverty." Another teacher declared: "Education becomes a second priority to survival." And in response to another teacher who advocated the practice of nightly storybook reading, one teacher jumped into the conversation, saying, "but they work 12 hours days: there is no time."

Most teachers operated with very general ideas about the actual details of families' daily lives. They understood that parents worked long hours in low-wage jobs, that many families lived in small crowded apartments, with few safe places for children to play, and that some children endured long commutes to school. One teacher noted that families go on outings to places like downtown Los Angeles and the public library; another talked about a family who buys books for their children at the 99-cent store. But few had ever visited with their students' families outside of school, and so their pictures of students' lives were elaborated through their own (largely middle-class) conceptions of family life, or their beliefs about immigrant families. (Six of the 10 teachers who participated in this project were themselves Latinos, but the majority were from middle-class backgrounds, and did not have direct, recent experience with immigrants.) For example, one teacher imagined aloud that a particular family had posted the public library schedule of weekend activities on their refrigerator. This seemed to be based on a comment that the parent had told the teacher about how they try to go to various activities the library offers, to puppet shows, story readings, and the like. The teacher made the assumption that a particular kind of literacy environment existed in this family home (i.e., that the refrigerator was used to post schedules of local events) in order to imagine a situation of which she did not have direct knowledge.

Views of success—and obstacles

As Reese et al. (1995) found, parents operated with a notion of success (or "doing well") that went well beyond academic achievement (see also Carger, 1997, and Pappas, 1997). This is captured in Marina Saldovar's response to our question about what she hoped for her son's future:

> Bueno, que sean buenos ciudadanos. Que sean humanitarios, que sepan respetar, y tener fe en Dios. Y quisiera uno todo padres tener unos hijos profesionales que pudieron valerse por sí solos. Y no que estén como nosotros pasando tantas, tantas penas.
>
> Well, that they be good citizens. That they be humanitarian, and respectful, with faith in God. And all parents hope to have children who are professionals, who can take care of themselves. And not suffer so many problems like us.

Teresa Macías, the mother of a 4-year-old at the preschool, had attended the university in El Salvador. She spoke about the problems of focusing only on schooling:

> Si les mete uno mucho al estudio los materializa. Al rato hasta se olvidan del afecto de los proprios padres, a sus próximos mucho más. Y ya no son humanitarios, sino que ellos, como están enfocados en que tienen que hacer eso, y la lectura y el estudio, y al rato van a ser profesionales, van a ser unos excelentes profesionales, pero sin sentimientos. Materializados.
>
> If you force them to study too much you commodify them. And after a while they lose their love for their own parents, for their own loved ones and all. And then they're no longer humanitarian, but rather they are focused only on what they have to do, their reading and their studies; and then after a while they will be professionals, and they'll be excellent professionals, but without feelings. Commodified.

Teachers, on the other hand, talked about success for their students mostly in terms of reading, writing, and learning in school. For example, one teacher noted that:

> ... the children in my room who are successful are very critical. They can think critically. Their logic skills are way up there. They think ahead. In terms of their comprehension when they read stories they predict, invent, without me even telling them.

Overall, we were struck by the sense of optimism that parents held for their children's futures. They talked again and again about the "opportunities" that their children had (in contrast with their own experiences). They sometimes referred to their own role in "getting their kids out ahead" (a literal translation of the phrase "lo he sacado adelante"), but in general conveyed the sense that it was up to kids to get themselves ahead. Of 22 references to their children "getting out ahead," only 7 were framed in relation to parents' help. Two parents mentioned getting ahead with their children; the rest phrased success as something their children were doing on their own: for example, "Está saliendo adelante" (She's coming out ahead).

Teachers' talk about kids' futures was not filled with the same optimism evident in parents' talk. Instead, teachers easily slid into talk about the obstacles that children faced in their current lives, such as those discussed above: transiency, parents' long hours of work and low pay, long commutes for some, dependence on public transportation, crowded living spaces, the limited reading skills of many parents, and families' limited money for books and related materials.

Teachers also had a lot to say about the obstacles that they faced in doing their jobs. They talked about restrictions on their ability to do what they felt was good for children. They had been told not to touch children in order to prevent accusations of inappropriate contact, but they felt that small children needed to be patted on the back and hugged. They were discouraged from taking children off the school grounds in their own cars, but there were inadequate resources for school-organized field trips. Occasionally they gave children rides home or took groups of children to local universities or to McDonalds as a treat. The school administration was concerned about possible legal action or fiscal responsibility and so discouraged these practices. The teachers faced difficult choices between following school guidelines and doing what they viewed as good for the children.

It is interesting to note that no teachers named educational practices or curricular issues as an obstacle to children's success. Literacy instruction in California at this time was taking place within a raging national debate between advocates for phonics and supporters of whole language, and Proposition 227 had recently been passed, forcing dramatic reorganization of language and literacy instruction in school. None of the teachers named any particular types of approaches or views of literacy as a concern.

While most parents conveyed a strong sense of hope for their children's futures, when we asked what might keep their children from doing well, or what they worried about for their children's futures, they had a lot to say. But the obstacles they named were rather different from those that the teachers talked about. Parents' worries centered on the dangers that lurked out in the world, embodied through the bad influences of peers: gangs, drugs, and sex were seen as deterrents to children's processes of "educación" (again, both morally and academically). Parents did not talk about their financial or monetary struggles, larger structural forces like poverty, racism, access to medical care, anti-immigrant sentiment, the structures of social class, or problems with schools or curriculum. Only once did a parent express a concern about a teacher not teaching adequately. (We realize that self-selection for participation in the parent focus groups may favor those parents with positive experiences and attitudes, and that all participants may have been hesitant to voice criticisms of the school in such a setting.) For the most part they did not locate problems in the character, disposition, or abilities of individual children.

Discussion

The parents and teachers with whom we talked seemed to operate with different points of reference—in a way, they operate in different temporal and spatial contexts. Parents compare their children's experiences in school with their own childhoods and schooling experiences in Central America. They note the opportunities that they did not have, and they see more possibilities for their futures. This is suggestive of Ogbu's (1978) theory that the children of "voluntary migrants" may benefit from their families' optimistic pursuits of the American Dream. (Just how "voluntary" these migrants are, however, is a matter of debate—many felt compelled to leave their home countries due to economic and political conditions, rather than by the lure of life in the U.S.) But parents certainly do not see a smooth road to success in their children's futures; they know that they will face obstacles and run the risk of "desviación" (deviation from the desired pathway). They locate the principal sources of such deviation in the interpersonal plane—the influence of peers who may be involved in gangs and drugs.

Teachers, on the other hand, tend to compare the lives of the children they teach with those of mainstream, middle-class America. This leads them to highlight the societal barriers that face this community, rather than their opportunities. Teachers speak sympathetically, and with great compassion, based on their understanding of families' lives. This stands in contrast to the perspectives that other researchers (e.g. Darder, 1991; Darder & Upshur, 1992; Flores, Cousin, & Díaz, 1991; Valdés, 1996) found among middle-class teachers working with working class Latino children—teachers who operated with more overt views of families' "deficits."

But despite the sympathetic stance, the Franklin teachers' focus on obstacles conflicts with the parents' tendency to invest their children with great power. And while the teachers do not locate deficits in the children or the families, by focusing on the problems of the local environment they overlook the possibilities that do exist for children. They also do not see the opportunities that these hardships may offer for children's learning and development. (This is not to celebrate those hardships, but rather to recognize that difficult life circumstances can prompt powerful learning, and allow for an understanding of the world that more materially-privileged children may never have.)

Teachers, for the most part, do not talk about the things that they are doing, or could do, in their own classrooms or school. They seem to feel relatively powerless in the face of the larger structural obstacles that they name. Instead, teachers typically look to students' families to make a difference for individual kids. This is ironic, given their recognition of the burdens with which families are already struggling. And it contrasts with the relative powerlessness that parents seem to feel.

Implications for literacy and school

The compassion that teachers at Franklin show for families' circumstances is laudable. But teachers might benefit from more specific understandings of

families' daily lives. This is where sociocultural studies of literacy can be most helpful; we can begin to articulate some of the specific daily practices that can be built upon in classroom settings. For example, given that many parents seem to translate environmental print for their children (which may affect what children learn about the meanings of print), teachers might provide explicit instruction in how to determine what language a book or sign is in. They might attend to the difference between making meaning from the total visual image and decoding the print itself. Teachers might help children see the benefits and limitations of both approaches, as complementary sets of strategies to use when tackling unfamiliar texts. Similarly, teachers might guide students in how to read the print on close-captioned television, so that children who have access to this resource at home might use it more effectively as a tool for literacy learning.

Teachers might explore how they could build in their literacy classrooms on the concrete daily practices in which families engage, like reading bus schedules and riding on buses through a print-filled urban environment. They might consider how children's readings of the social world around them could be supported and developed through storybook reading, especially socially conscious texts. And they might help students to use their developing literacy skills to combat some of the injustices that they face every day—by writing letters to politicians, local businesspeople, and school administrators about current policy issues.

Parents and teachers could also benefit from more time to talk together, in order to share their perspectives on the world, histories and experiences, and visions of the future—simple gatherings that celebrate the work that both parents and teachers do to help children "do well." The parents that we met with in focus groups said that they yearned for spaces to gather with others and talk about their children. Such gatherings might then move into plans for joint endeavors—even simple projects in which parents, teachers, and children can engage together. It is when people work and talk together that we learn about each others' views of the world and the realities of each others' lives. And when teachers and parents have shared understandings they will be better able to collaborate in improving possibilities for the children that they love and teach.

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